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ALBERT SAMMONS.

By Marion M. Scott.

OVER a trunk line uncannily clear this telephone conversation took place early in 1912:

"Dr. Ethel Smyth speaking. I want the Society of Women Musicians. Look here, I'm sorry, but I can't let you do that quartet of mine after all at your concert. My doctor has ordered me away for six weeks, and as I shall not get back in time to superintend the rehearsals, my quartet must be withdrawn."

S. W. M. official (like a horrified Horatius!): "Dr. Smyth, we can't! We have already made all the arrangements with the London String Quartet to play your new quartet. The 'First Performance' has been advertised, and if you withdraw it, you will give the most frightful blow to the programme of our first public concert! Success means so much to us. Please reconsider your decision."

"Sorry, but I must say NO absolutely. I cannot trust any English players to produce a work of mine without me. I know what it is; I've had experience before."

"But this is different; it is the London String Quartet. Please, *please* reconsider your decision. Couldn't you arrange something somehow?"

"*No.* Besides, it is a quartet of men. Who are they?"

"Albert Sammons, Thomas Petre, Waldo Warner and Warwick Evans."

"Who did you say is the leader?"

"Albert Sammons."

"*Albert Sammons!* Why didn't you say so before? The one man in London I can trust!"

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That saved the situation. The two movements of Dame Ethel's E minor quartet were played in Small Queen's Hall, and the composer liked the result so well that later she added two more movements to the work, which is now widely known.

Time has justified Dame Ethel's insight. Albert Sammons stands in the front rank of violinists. If he has taught people to trust him it is perhaps because he has had to trust himself for nearly everything except his early existence.

His father was an amateur violinist. Albert Edward (royally named) was born in London on February 23, 1886. He learnt first from his father. Later he had a few violin lessons from John Saunders and F. Weist-Hill. Otherwise he is self-taught. He left school when twelve years old to earn his living by playing the violin—a mill that breaks many and makes few. Like Casals he worked in cafés. There was one, for example, in Piccadilly. Many nights he walked home, because the last bus had gone. For seven years he played in theatres, hotels, or anywhere that an engagement offered. He became a pseudo-Hungarian in one of the Red or Blue Hungarian bands fashionable at the time. The players were forbidden to speak, for the sufficient reason that not one of them knew Hungarian.

Artists before now have surrendered their birthright for the sake of pottage, or become debased by contact with bad music. May be the popular music of that time was less trashy than the jazz of today. At best it was pretty and witty, at worst, vulgar—waste snippings from the melodic and harmonic texture that made great music. Sullivan's operettas had high descent from Mozart. The music-hall tunes linked on to Tchaikovsky. But even allowing this much, the fact that Sammons came through unharmed argues force of character and the integrity of the true artist—the artist who knows that music is not an industry of tunes, chords, rhythms, but an apprehension of divine truth. Old George Herbert showed heavenly common sense when he wrote:

> "Who sweeps a room as to Thy laws
> Makes that and the action fine."

Sammons came out of bondage in 1908. Beecham happened to hear him play Mendelssohn's violin concerto at the Waldorf Hotel, and gauged his man at once. He offered him the leadership of the Beecham Symphony Orchestra, which Sammons naturally accepted. Then followed five years of first-class orchestral work, when Sammons led the Royal Philharmonic Society's Orchestra, led under Nikisch at the London Opera House, led the Russian Ballet Orchestra in Berlin, toured Germany under Monteux, and, in 1913, led the Dieppe Symphony Orchestra. He also received offers to lead the London Symphony, the Queen's Hall, and the Hallé orchestras, besides orchestras in America.

Meantime Sammons came to the front as soloist and ensemble player. In 1910 he founded the New (later the London) String Quartet with Petre, Warner, and Warwick Evans. They had great success here, and also played in Paris and Amsterdam. In 1911 Sammons got his chance as soloist at a Patron's Fund Concert in Queen's Hall—the same year in which he was appointed Musician in Ordinary to the King. In 1912 he had the honour of playing Saint-Saëns's violin concerto before the King and Queen and the composer. In 1914 he was just going to America when war broke out.

The next four years were a medley. He served in the Grenadier Guards Band as a clarinettist (and thought himself not much good at the job), and he retained the leadership of the London String Quartet. He produced John Ireland's Second sonata for violin and piano (which made a great stir) and gave superb performances of Beethoven's, Brahms's and Elgar's concertos in London and the provinces. By 1919 Sammons realized his destiny as soloist and teacher. He soon gave up regular ensemble playing, oven as he had renounced orchestral work, and no offers, however tempting, have drawn him back.

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Sammons stands as a violinist apart from any particular school. One cannot say "Here is the Auer bowing," or "the Sevčik left hand," "the high French elbow," or "the old Italian wrist." His playing looks entirely natural. In a sense it *is* natural, because he has gone to the root of the mechanical problems involved, has thought out every one for himself, and has found the best way of applying his physical power to his instrument.

Like some other great artists, he says that no two people can bow alike because no two people have exactly similar hands and arms. Each one has to

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find his own way. For example, a tall violinist with long arms must somehow dispose of the length between his shoulder and the spot where the bow moves at right angles across the strings. Possibly the long elbow, wrist and hand look ungraceful; but something has to be done, and the music is what matters. I remember Sammons saying that he believes one secret of Mischa Elman's tremendous tone is that Elman happens to have arms of just the right length to exert the maximum power on the violin without mechanical waste.

Following these physical adjustments, Sammons considers, so I gather, that the right elbow and wrist should be neither high nor low, but should occupy a sort of centre plane from which the different actions required can proceed naturally. For example, sautillé bowings should be brought about by the natural springing rebound of the bow, and not be applied from above downwards, like drops of water, from a high wrist. Then again Sammons regards the two centre strings as the fundamental resting place for the bow, to which the bow arm should be adjusted and from which, by the quickest, nearest actions, the bow can reach either of the outer strings.

Technical traditions that do not yield good results are to him mere pedantry: he takes nothing at second hand. His first-hand knowledge of the violin, its history and literature, is deep. He will talk as intimately on Corelli and Stradivarius as, the next minute, on the new Vincent fiddles and the reasons for their unusually homogeneous tone. If the question arises about the date of some violin maker of former days he will either give it at once or go across to the bookshelves that surround his studio and put his finger immediately on the reference. Quite simply, when discussing technique, he takes his violin and illustrates his points.

He is a very strong player. Far from worrying about his hands, he is an enthusiastic golfer. Something of open-air energy gives stamina to his style. He stands quietly and firmly: violin and bow are unobtrusively right in position. The tone he produces is large, and there is a colour of sadness in it like the undercurrent of pathos in Purcell's music. Capable of many shades of expression, it is peculiarly bright and ringing high on the E string. In staccato Sammons is decisive, in spiccato and sautillé very swift and even. His left-hand playing is equally fine: the arpeggios and scales strong and smoothly bound, the double-stopping firm, the chord-playing bold.

Behind all this there is a musical character of rare force. It made such an impression upon Herbert Howells that his First Sonata for violin and pianoforte, in E, is actually a portrait of Sammons's personality and playing, while the Third is dedicated to him. Relations between Sammons and composers have always been sympathetic. He composes himself (Cobbett's Cyclopedia refers to his Phantasy Quartet as a work of "marked originality"), and he understands the composer's point of view. Many British works have been first produced by him—among them Elgar's quartet and quintet; Delius's violin concerto, Second sonata, and string quartet; John Ireland's Second violin sonata; J. B. McEwen's violin sonata and string quartets, and Herbert Howells's Third violin sonata.

Sammons says that all great classical works have their tradition, and that if people want to perform them well they must know the traditions even if they do not adopt them *au pied de la lettre*. In English music Sammons has done more than other violinists to establish a true tradition. Foreign artists seldom trouble to understand our island art. Yet our music has reached a stage in which it is so sincerely the expression of national genius and character that it is doubtful if continental players can ever come at the heart of it. Our own people are required—British executants as the complement of British composers.

In the concertos by Elgar and Delius Sammons has set a tradition for the world. There was a certain performance of Elgar's concerto last year at a Royal Philharmonic Concert. Sir Edward, who conducted, said afterwards that of the many performances of his concerto by Sammons "this was the very finest I ever heard my friend Albert give." It was superb in all respects. Those who were present are not likely to forget the thrill of the violin's first entry after the opening tutti—the tremendous purpose, the great passionate tone as Sammons flung up the lifting phrase on the G string. Nor will anyone lightly forget the grave splendour of the first movement, the tender beauty of the second, the strong brilliance of the third, and the philosophical truth of the cadenza.

There is another notable English work with which Sammons is associated (though he did not give it the first performance), and I only withhold its name to allow of my relating the following story. Sammons was engaged to play this work at an important concert. As the conductor was a man of very decided views, Sammons realized there were three ways in which he might be called upon to interpret the work—his own, the composer's, or the conductor's. He prepared all three and eventually played . . . but readers may guess which! They will, however, be wrong if they think Sammons imposed himself upon the others. His trustworthiness, as Dame Ethel observed years ago, is great.

Strange that so fine an artist should be so little known abroad. But it is not out of keeping with the English character of his genius that home attracts him thus strongly. Perhaps, too, his playing might, without this long English environment, have missed those very qualities by which it speaks so movingly when it gives back to his own and Rupert Brooke's fellow-countrymen "the thoughts by England given."

'OLD VIC' OPERA.

Sadler's Wells Theatre, the old Islington house rebuilt, was reopened last month under Miss Lilian Baylis's management in conjunction with the 'Old Vic.' This means opera every day by the Old Vic company at one or the other house. There was a vivacious, clever Carmen in Enid Cruickshank. The Magic Flute' was distinguished by the charming Pamina, Joan Cross, a singer with a finely sustained legato. 'Trovatore' was chiefly remarkable for Constance Willis's Azucena, a powerful, ardent performance. The first opera at Sadler's Wells was 'Carmen' on January 20.